most of whom belonged to the Quasimi clan, of which the Sheikh of Sharjah is the titular head. I have had many a joke with Sheikh Sultan and his nobles over stories of the old piratical days, and they were greatly amused to learn that my great-great-grandfather, who entered the Royal Navy as a midshipman in 1789, had taken part in a sortie against Sharjah in 1830, when his frigate shelled the town as a reprisal against a murderous attack on a British merchantman. I shall refer later to the history of piracy in Oman which, on account of the predatory raids on shipping, gained the title of 'the Pirate Coast' in the last century.

The town of Sharjah is built on the shores of the creek, the contour of which it follows in crescent shape until the open sea is reached; at low tide a spit of sand or 'bar', separates the creek from the Gulf. Only at low tide is it possible to cross the creek on foot and make the journey to Khan; on the far side of this sand-bridge or 'bar' there is a primitive wooden lighthouse, built by the sheikh for the guidance of the pearling boats, and a small colony of fishermen's huts. The residences of the merchants, which are all two-storeyed buildings with wide verandas and imposing gateways, are built facing the sea, a distinct advantage in the hot weather. When a breeze is blowing, they are cooler inside in the summer months than an air-conditioned room at the Fort, and much more pleasant.

The town is about half a mile in length, and an eighth of a mile wide, with narrow, crooked streets running through the centre, and quaint, dark alleyways formed by the back walls of the houses. I could never get accustomed to the twists and curves of these streets, some of which were wide enough for only two people to pass abreast, although the Arabs used to ride donkeys and camels through them. Little doorways would suddenly open in the walls, whilst from a window high up would descend a cascade of refuse or dirty water. Some of these doorways are extremely beautiful; shaped like the double doors of an old English church, they are set in a frame of decorated stone, and the unvarnished teak is studded with pointed brass knobs. Sometimes they are inset with a secondary door, large enough to admit one person.

One afternoon I accompanied the Station Engineer, Sparkes, to Sharjah on a shopping expedition; we took a mechanic, Mahmud, with us to act as interpreter. Sparkes wanted to haggle with one of the merchants, and rather impolitely declined to rely on my Arabic. He had recently purchased an old Arab seal, a large, oval

2: O'Shea G-3 (1944-1945) 1947 MK4 Trucial Oman MK4

chalcedony stone with a faded inscription, and had taken it to the silversmith to have it made into a ring; the purpose of his visit was to collect and pay for it, not always a simple matter in Arabia, where the merchant normally demands twice the legitimate price and expects to be beaten down.

Mohammed, who is a Baluchi and lives with his family in the poorer part of the town, took us through the less salubrious quarter. Sharjah has no city wall proper, but its place is taken by a ring of filthy hovels, the palm-thatched barousti huts of the coolies, slaves and servants. The stench from these slums is unbearable in hot weather, for each hut dweller uses his front door as a cesspool and a refuse dump, and the place is infested with flies and insects; native children crawl about in the sand, and mangy pai dogs snarl at one's approach. These miserable hovels afford protection against neither sun nor rain, and it is remarkable that their poverty-stricken inhabitants are not afflicted with disease. The quarter is a disgrace to Sharjah town and, although the Political Officer has remonstrated with the sheikh about it, he refuses to have the place rebuilt.

It was a pleasant relief to pass into the cool, dim alleys leading to the town; many of them are roofed with palm-thatch and are comparatively clean. The walls are honeycombed with doorways, leading to the houses of the tradesmen and metalsmiths. After a walk of fifteen minutes through the maze of dark, winding streets, during the progress of which we were conscious of hundreds of dark eyes staring curiously at us, we reached the sugar market. This is a large square in the centre of the town; it is roofed-in with huge strips of palm-matting, supported by whitewashed wooden pillars, making it very dim inside.

Tethered to the pillars were six camels, snarling and grumbling; occasionally they tried to rise, but their forefeet were tied together and they would hobble for a few yards and quickly fall back on their knees. They had brought bags of sugar from a boat in the harbour, and their owners were arguing over prices with the brokers. The market, which is about six hundred feet square, contains warehouses, brokers' offices and shops on each side. We should have liked to take a photograph of it, but as Sparkes had no time-exposure on his camera he decided not to risk wasting his film.

The colour and variety of dress one sees in a native bazaar is remarkable. The women are the least attractive, their trousers, wraps and veils being of an unrelieved black; it is their menfolk

CHAPTER XIII

437 HASSAN BIN AHMIDFA, the young pearl merchant, walked into my office at the Fort one morning and placed a little cardboard box on my desk. He helped himself to one of my cigarettes and smiled slyly as I opened the box. Under a layer of cotton wool there were a dozen gleaming white pearls. I took them out and placed them in the palm of my hand; they had a moon-white lustre, their surface reflected my face like a mirror, and there was a sheen of pink, green and gold in their texture.

'Sougini,' remarked Hassan, referring to their quality. That is, the second-best grade. He knew I was interested in picking up a few pearls if I could get them cheaply enough, and said he had managed to buy these from a friend. They were not of the finest quality, but the season had only just begun and one could only get the lower grades now.

I asked him how much they were. He shrugged and picked up a pear-shaped pearl, the size of a large pea, and balanced it in his hand.

'This weighs about eight *chaus*,' he said. 'You can have it for ninety rupees.'

I pushed the box away. 'Too much,' I answered. 'What do you take me for—a Maharajah?'

'It is worth much more, sahib,' he grinned. 'You can have the lot for three hundred rupees—but I will not sell this one for less than ninety.'

That was arithmetic I could not follow. The pearls all looked of similar quality to me, and I could have twelve of them for three hundred rupees; yet if I chose to buy one pearl I must pay ninety rupees. Again I examined them closely, but could detect no flaws. I took my cheque book from the drawer and paid him three hundred rupees; then we had a cup of coffee, English style, to seal the bargain. Hassan was perfectly honest and I have never regretted my purchase.

229 Pearls are the life-blood of the Persian Gulf, and more than half the populations of the towns and villages in Oman work at the

228 up outside the traffic office at the Fort just before the arrival of the
459 aircraft, to have them weighed, insured and locked up in the safe. Only one package was ever lost in transit, and in this case the insurance company paid the consignors compensation after investigations lasting three years.

228 Pearl fishing is the principal source of wealth among the people
434 on the Arabian side. It has been estimated that, if the supply of pearls were to fail—either owing to a disease among the oysters or sterility due to poisoning of the beds—the effect would be disastrous; the ports of the Trucial Oman Coast, which have no other resources, would practically cease to exist. The purchasing power of the inhabitants of the eastern coast of Arabia depends almost entirely on the pearl fisheries. In normal times about five thousand boats are employed in the industry, and more than seventy-four thousand operatives are engaged, not taking into account their families. Apart from the divers and boats' crews there are numerous capitalists, large and small, with their dependents whose funds are invested in the industry.

439 The value of the trade varies with the demand; in 1833 the annual value of pearls exported from the Gulf was only £300,000; in 1886 it was £400,000; in 1904 it was only £30,439—an extremely poor season—whilst prior to the war it reached the high figure of £1,500,000. Whether in the near future the annual turnover will again exceed the million mark depends on two factors: the dictates of fashion, and the condition of the oyster beds.

228 Hassan's family have been engaged in the pearling industry for three hundred years, and he knows as much about pearls as any man. He can judge the weight of a pearl exactly by balancing it in his hand, and estimate its texture by scraping its surface with his teeth.
437 Many merchants carry a tiny pair of jewellers' scales with them, for business deals are often carried out in the café or even in the street. Many are sold on commission by 'agents' and I have even had pearls offered to me by bearers, coolies and guards.

228 Hassan told me a great deal about the pearling industry, although
825 some of the Arab lore is hardly scientific. Thus, if there is a poor crop, the natives often ascribe this to shortage of rain. There is a tradition that the young and shell-less oysters come to the surface when it is raining, or the moon is full. The raindrops are the seeds of fertility, while the moon produces lustre; the rain is the father of a good pearl and the oyster the mother. It is a poetical notion, and no one has disproved its truth.

2: O'Shea G-3 (1944-1945) 1947 MK4 Trucial Oman MK4

The *Nakhuda* himself is very seldom free from debt, for the expenses of fitting out and provisioning the boats and of retaining the services of capable divers and making them advances, often as much as 3,000 rupees per season, make him equally dependent on the *Musaqqams*, or moneylenders. Should a *Nakhuda* be unable to pay off his debts, the *Salifat-al-Ghaus*, or 'Diving Court', a tribunal set up by the sheikh of the district, may order his boats to be sold and his divers to be handed over to the creditor, although his house and other personal property is exempt from seizure. Usually, however, the court fixes an annual instalment for the discharge of the debt, and the *Nakhuda* is then free to form relations with another *Musaqqam*, if he can find one willing to finance him in these circumstances. These rules, although drastic, are very necessary to protect the pearling industry from financial loss.

The diving court has other functions, one of which is to enforce the 'laws' of the industry as regards the engagement of labour, rates of interest, supervision of taxes due to the sheikhs, and the maintenance of a standard of quality of the pearls sold in the open market. Dealers who charge excess prices for pearls, or who pass bad or spurious pearls for those of first quality, are severely reprimanded or even suspended from trading, whilst the man who dares to bring a false or 'cultured' pearl into the Gulf is liable to be outlawed by the sheikh.

It is interesting to watch the brokers haggling over a heap of gleaming pearls in the market. It would take the average European several minutes to work out a price, but the Arab merchant, even when otherwise illiterate, is usually a clever mathematician and benefits by the fluctuations of market rates and by the discrepancies of the weighing appliances in use in the Gulf. Some experts, generally sea-going *Tawwashes*, or dealers, profess a power to distinguish roughly the depth of water and even the particular neighbourhood from which a pearl shown to them may have been obtained; thus they assert that pearls from the banks near Bahrain are marked by greater lustre, and those from banks further northward by greater 'solidity'. They all possess an uncanny ability to sum a pearl up at a glance, and the success of the individual trader depends chiefly upon his power to appraise the relative fineness of pearls belonging to the same class, and he has no set rules to assist his judgment.

The largest pearls are sent to India to be sold individually by the *chau*; but, in the assortment of the remainder into packets—